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Arjun Banerjee
University of Tennessee Knoxville

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Book Review

Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?

Graham Allison

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, USA; 2017, 364 Pages
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Reviewed by Arjun Banerjee

Deputy Commissioner (Customs and GST), Indian Revenue Service, Govt. of India
PhD Candidate, Political Science, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Graham Allison is among the most respected scholars in the field of international relations. In his latest book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Allison addresses a theme that has haunted the psyche of the American government for the past few decades: Will China surpass the U.S. to become the world's leading superpower? If so, will the U.S. sit quietly and twiddle its thumbs? Allison argues that the answer to both questions is no. Why not? Enter the Thucydides Trap, an idea from ancient Greece which posits that when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, war is the most likely outcome. According to Allison, twelve out of sixteen similar instances in the past five hundred years have resulted in war. The present-day Sino-U.S. relationship appears to be the seventeenth and most recent case, and the impending threat that Thucydides wrote of in 5th Century BC looms large.

The book's title and cover, which features an ominous cloud of smoke, paint a worrisome picture of the sort of international crisis that may be forthcoming. Inside the book, Allison presents rigorous and in-depth analyses of each of the sixteen aforementioned instances as they are documented in the Thucydides's Trap Case File of Harvard University's Belfer Center. He details the specific factors that led to war in twelve of the sixteen cases and asks the question of how—in four of sixteen instances—war was averted. He beseeches the leadership of both countries—especially leadership of the U.S.—to take cues from the creative statecraft of years past, statecraft that successfully diffused escalating tensions between Portugal and Spain in the late 15th century, the United Kingdom and the United States in the early 20th century, the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 20th century, and the United Kingdom and France/Germany in the middle-to-late 20th centuries. Allison also urges the U.S. Government to clarify and prioritize its vital interests, rather than pursuing geopolitical projects in distant parts of the world that are not necessarily of paramount importance to American interests. He also argues that the US should attempt to better understand China's internal dynamics, rather than considering it a state whose vital interests mirror America's own, and should prioritize domestic issues as the primary endeavor.

Some of the very-recent facts and figures of the modern Chinese economic and military machine that Allison includes could make the uninitiated reader feel a bit out-of-date, simply because they serve to demonstrate that nation's meteoric rise over the last several decades. For example, Allison draws a

parallel between the U.S. and China on four counts, comparing 1980 to 2015 with the Chinese pecuniary figures as a percentage of U.S. figures in raw value terms. First, China's GDP was 7% of the U.S.'s in 1980, and in 2015 was 61%; second, imports were 8%, then in 2015, 73%; third, exports were 8%, and in 2015 were at 151%; finally, reserves were 16% in 1980 compared to a staggering 3,140% in 2015.

Despite the meticulous research conducted, and presented throughout, which supports Allison's argument, the very nature of his argument, that war between an era's dominant power and a rising power is almost inevitable, could perhaps be more closely scrutinized. First, in modern times, both the U.S. and China tend to be fairly pragmatic in terms of their military-related decision-making. Neither side would be eager to engage in any brutal war with each other, which would leave both economies (if not tertiary countries, as well) in shambles, given the extent of the potentially destructive power they possess. Both countries are certainly aware of the likely consequences of a potential face-off. Even if the U.S. has a military advantage in terms of sheer numbers of warheads and quicker ability to launch a nuclear triad attack, China has the capacity to damage the stronger nation, possibly beyond repair.

Furthermore, of the examples Allison cites, two of the four instances when war was effectively avoided are from the nuclear age—from the 1940s on, when the world had come to understand, post-WWII, the massive destructive potential of nuclear bombs. The twelve other instances from the Thucydides's Trap Case File, the instances when war was indeed the outcome, were cases in which none of the warring nations possessed nuclear weapons. Ergo, they may, to an extent, be an inappropriate tool for gauging whether "nuclear haves" would resort to all-out war, considering the destructive potential of these weapons. In today's interconnected global village, international communications are probably more effective, on multiple levels, for avoiding such wars.

Finally, the 21st century world is multipolar. The U.S. and China may be the two most dominant great powers in international affairs today, but there are indeed other militarily or economically powerful nations that could mediate, should tensions escalate between the two countries. Nine nations are nuclear powers now, and several among them have intercontinental ballistic missile capability, with Russia possessing the most such missiles. The European Union, Japan, and the Asian Tiger countries, among others, are economic powerhouses with considerable clout in international politics. India is a rising player both economically and militarily, while Pakistan, too, is nuclear-armed, and the two possess roughly 250 nuclear weapons between them. Thus, the main thesis of Allison's book that the U.S. and China are likely destined for war, as history suggests, could appear as to rise from disproportionate concerns and could be not entirely realistic.

Still, *Destined for War* is a commendable piece of historic research with an interesting theory, and Allison's writing is engaging as well—but the theory put forward is certainly not the only viable lens through which to perceive the future course of international affairs and Sino-U.S. relations.